

ROBERT T. BAPST: CATHOLIC EDUCATOR AND PUBLIC SCHOOLMASTER

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Over the course of 40 years in the public schools of Buffalo, New York, as principal and superintendent, Robert Bapst earned a reputation as efficient and forward-thinking. His leadership skills first received attention at South Park High School where, as founding principal, he created an environment noted for academic excellence, student development, and good citizenship. What is unusual about Bapst's tenure was his ability to integrate his Catholic beliefs with the goals of public education. Jesuit-educated, Bapst stressed personal concern for the individual, community-building, and service to others as hallmark Christian values to be integrated within the life of the school. He saw no conflict of interest in this for church and state cohabited, happily. Evidently his constituents concurred since the records contain no serious challenges to his program.

From her pedestal inside the front doors of South Park High School in Buffalo, New York, Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom, has greeted generations of students. Her imposing presence dominates the foyer, casting a spell on those who enter. Crafted of Carrara marble, the statue stands in tribute to what the founder and first principal of the school, Robert T. Bapst, believed education should be: a finely chiseled classical portrait of knowledge and virtue capable of enriching both student and society.

Minerva appears invincible yet delicate, capturing the complexity of Bapst's educational mission as an overseer who was to sow seeds of citizenship and character, expand boundaries of mind and spirit, and take the reins in guiding faculty and student growth. Bapst once stated during a school assembly that "the purpose of education is to get our principles well-established" (Bapst, 1929d, p. 2). In his thinking, these principles were a complex overlay of personal and public beliefs, of secular and religious creeds, and of academic and social tenets. During his 18 years as the principal of South

Park, Bapst remained faithful to these principles, carving out an image of the academic leader as a zealous, dedicated, and professional person of conviction.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

To understand Bapst's vision it is necessary to walk his educational path. He frequently punctuated conversations with a favorite saying about schooling taken from the Dickens novel *Our Mutual Friend*, "There's no royal road to learning" (1865/1951, p. 708). This statement summarized for Bapst what it meant to be educated and to educate: a lifelong process of seeking truth, knowledge, and virtue despite obstacles and hardship. Bapst believed that education was a campaign conducted with difficulty, but well worth the effort in the end.

Bapst's educational journey began in September 1892, when the 12-year-old neophyte walked three blocks from his home to be enrolled at Canisius College as a high school student. The influence of this school upon Bapst proved to be a lasting and pervasive force that would extend far beyond his completion of the baccalaureate program in 1900 and into his work as teacher and administrator. Eight years of Jesuit education imbued Bapst's spirit with lifelong attitudes and values; nurtured his mind with sustenance from the classics, philosophy, and literature; and inspired his soul with deep-seated faith and religious devotion. With gratitude and fondness, he often acknowledged the penetrating personal and professional impact of the Canisius years (Bapst, 1933).

When Bapst entered Canisius College, he became part of a 300-year tradition of Jesuit education emphasizing intellectual and moral excellence. The German Jesuit faculty had tried to re-create the gymnasium of their homeland in their new mission territory located on the shores of Lake Erie. The curriculum and daily order were cast in the European classical design, conceding some adaptations to the thriving mercantile culture of 19th-century Buffalo. The seeds of this tradition nevertheless remained rooted in three sources, documents at the heart of all Jesuit educational endeavors: the *Plan of Studies* (*Ratio Studiorum*), the *Spiritual Exercises*, and the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*. To appreciate the nature of a college such as Canisius, its impact upon students, and its contribution to the development of Robert Bapst, it is necessary to be familiar with the main ideas contained in these writings.

The *Plan of Studies* (1599) was a compendium of motivational forces that strengthened the Jesuit commitment to education as well as a source of practical directives for those engaged in teaching. This document capitalized on the Renaissance awareness of the beauty of human experience by organizing the curriculum around three poles: the classics of ancient Greece and

Rome, the philosophy of Aristotle, and the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Although the *Plan* exhibited a preoccupation with the glories of the past, it also legislated that mastery of the best in contemporary learning be incorporated in Jesuit schools.

The methods described in the *Plan* relied heavily upon the experiences of its Jesuit authors, many of whom were graduates of the University of Paris during the early 1500s. The characteristics of this methodology include: "a distinctly graduated order of studies; a respect for the varying capabilities of students; an insistence upon class attendance; an abundance of exercises" (Bangert, 1972, p. 28). The educational strategies used in the Jesuit school included repetition of material that had been taught, competitive devices intended to motivate, and the prelection by which the instructor prepared students for the next assignment. The result was a detailed and structured system that placed great emphasis upon the worth of the individual student, whose involvement in and mastery of the program of studies were considered essential for success. A graduate would be a true classical humanist whose life would be spent in service to God and society.

In addition to methodological concerns, the *Plan* also identified four purposes of a Jesuit education: 1) growth in the intellectual, moral, and social maturity of the student; 2) emphasis on the interrelatedness of intellectual, moral, and social maturity; 3) recognition of the importance of the moral aspect of this growth process; and 4) embracement of the elements of school life as tools for molding the true Christian as a person of dedicated service. The object of Jesuit education, then, was a graduate who would be able to function as a creative, mature, and learned Christian leader.

The distinctive educational philosophy of the *Plan of Studies* was grounded in two other documents that embodied the insights and experiences of Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. Although not exclusively concerned with education, both the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* portray the individual as a committed believer whose informed choices work for the greater glory of God in the world. The Jesuit graduate, therefore, should have an understanding of the purpose of all life, pursue ways of being of more service to God, and make a positive contribution to the world.

At Canisius College in the twilight years of the 19th century, this ideal of educating students to exercise Christian responsibility and leadership in the community was perpetuated through the faculty, who believed that the soul of this ideal was embodied in the Jesuit philosophy of education, shaped by the traditional classical curriculum, and that its heart was animated by religious orthodoxy. This "clearly discernible Jesuit tradition, handed on from one generation to another, conservative for the most part" (McGucken, 1932, p. 145), endowed Canisius College with a distinctive character and aimed to produce graduates committed to service of God and society.

During his first four years of study, Bapst followed the college preparatory curriculum, which included Christian doctrine, English, Latin, German, arithmetic, history, geography, and penmanship. Records indicate that his academic performance was rather average, except for Christian doctrine, and also reveal that in matters of conduct, attentiveness, discipline, and attendance Bapst was unassailable, not having a single blameworthy mark registered against his name for his high school years.

If his secondary-level achievements seemed undistinguished, his college years, by contrast, were remarkable. Bapst pursued a study of the classical course with great zeal and earned excellent grades. He elected to take French and gained recognition as an honors student. The course of studies became more rigorous as philosophy tracts were added during the final two years of the program. Bapst flourished, especially in the areas of metaphysics, ethics, and logic, and on several occasions his success was recognized when faculty members awarded him academic prizes with distinction. Bapst took an active part in school organizations, exercising leadership roles in several, particularly those of a religious nature (Canisius College Catalogue, 1899-1900). As the top-ranked graduate, Bapst was designated student speaker for commencement and addressed his audience with gusto by expounding upon the topic "Liberal Education."

Bapst's talk reflected upon the beauty and utility of the type of education Canisius had offered him and his fellow graduates and summarized the meaning and distinctiveness of that experience. The years at Canisius had sharpened his love of learning and stimulated his ways of thinking. Bapst emerged a pensive and inquiring humanist eager to tackle Latin verse or Thomistic thesis. Taught that logical, clear analysis could defeat ignorance, he realized that process, methodology, and consistent application were routines that held the key to wisdom. Bapst's address foreshadowed Donohue's later comment that "Jesuit schools believed in creativity and self-expression, to be sure. But they also believed that this was not to be had apart from the discipline of hard work and the apprenticeship of constant practice" (1963, p. 67).

Bapst graduated from Canisius possessing enduring spiritual beliefs and values. True to the *Plan*, he envisioned the world as saved but not totally, good but flawed, fulfilled but not complete. Salvation had been offered by a loving God to everyone. True believers would cooperate in bringing all creation back to its Creator by acting upon Christian values and promoting justice. Being a responsible believer entailed rendering service to those in need so that whatever remained unfinished in the universe would be reclaimed for God. This instrumentality was to be exercised wherever humanity was not yet whole so that the plan of salvation to bring all creation under the reign of God might be advanced (J. Demerly, personal communication, October 22, 1991).

TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR

No one was surprised when an outstanding student like Bapst announced his desire to enter the teaching profession. His decision, however, was not merely a vocational choice that he found agreeable and suited to his talents. Bapst insisted that it was in educating others that he would contribute to making the world more God-centered. Education would always retain its intellectual component, but it also would assume a moral hue since in his mind learning was linked to the divine plan for creation. Bapst would lead others along the path of knowledge and virtue, thereby enlisting them in the service of God under the banners of scholarship and salvation.

A profile of the novice educator can be sketched from Bapst's Canisius experience. What emerges is a portrait of an intelligent, religious man whose approach to education mirrored the conservative, classical heritage of his Jesuit training. If the tradition demanded sacrifice and work, so be it, for "there's no royal road to learning." If the Jesuit educational tradition was somewhat restrictive, limiting the range of educational options and insisting upon certain pedagogical practices, so be it. The tradition nonetheless was able to produce learned, virtuous leaders such as Bapst who, for over four decades, would prove effective in transmitting this tradition and its world vision to others in western New York.

Bapst launched his teaching career at his alma mater, where for four years he was an instructor of mathematics and English at the secondary level. He then moved to the college wing at Canisius where he taught English for two additional years. It was during this period that Bapst earned masters and doctoral degrees, so that when he was named principal of a public grammar school in 1908 he possessed impeccable credentials. Bapst's performance at Public School 35 gave testimony to the excellence of his training and earmarked him for greater things in the district (J. N. Hayes, personal communication, October 21, 1991).

When the Board of Education approved a high school planned for the southern section of the city, Bapst was appointed its founding principal in April 1914, before completion of the building. It was here at South Park High School that he matured professionally. Bapst created an educational environment that is remembered as idyllic and one which integrated sound pedagogy and educational training with a sense of values and tradition. Under his leadership, South Park High became an unusual blend of what was best in public education and what was Catholic. Whether this was a covert or overt undertaking, this public school reflected the strong character and creed of its first principal, whose training and experience combined the secular and sacred.

Even today an anecdote circulates about the unusual nature of South Park High School. The story is told that when the Diocese of Buffalo mounted a financial campaign to build a new Catholic high school in the southern region

of the city the response of many locals was surprise, indicating there was absolutely no need for an additional Catholic school since South Park was doing quite well. For these individuals, Robert Bapst was the founding father of an institution which cultivated not just mind and body, but also the soul. The whole person was nourished at South Park.

Three priorities emerged in the addresses of Robert Bapst that account for the unique character of the South Park program. These priorities contributed to its tremendous success, and each can be traced back to Bapst's experience and training. The first priority emphasized individual growth, maturity, and wholeness; the second stressed the importance community-building played within his educational system; and the third involved a commitment to the service of others (J. Demerly, personal communication, October 22, 1991, and J. N. Hayes, personal communication, October 21, 1991).

This blueprint for education originated with the individual whose intellectual growth in school was accompanied by a strong sense of moral development (Bapst, 1929c). Bapst acknowledged the importance of imparting learning and information to the student, but decried those who maintained that a genuine education stopped there. True education was a process of evoking power within the person, that is, the power to search for happiness and to understand the aim of life. While many people might appear content learning an assortment of facts and not anything about their meaning, for Bapst, this was not a true education. "No assortment of knowledge will ever allow for a deficiency of power" (Bapst, 1924a, p. 6). This power, conceived in "the ability to think and to think straight" (Bapst, 1924b, p. 5), allowed the individual to comprehend meaning and act appropriately. South Park graduates were to be knowledgeable but, more importantly, were to possess wisdom, the power of discernment.

If education meant power, however, it did not connote the moral power which comes from good will and the heart (Bapst, 1926). To follow conscience was primary, as long as it was informed conscience. In March 1926 Bapst addressed a school assembly with these thoughts:

Hold fast to what is right. Don't be weakened. Remember it is much better to be an individual than a jellyfish.... You have got to maintain your individuality.... Stick to what you know is right, because there is no one more insipid as one neither on this side or that; who always holds the middle course; who is blown this way or that way. The stem of such a weed is weak. Don't be an individual like that. Be yourself always.... Stand by what you know is right even if it is against the whole world—if every other individual seems to have launched himself against you.... Remember that when you stand for what is right that the Lord is on your side, and if you have Him on your side, then you will have the powerful majority. (1926, p. 11)

Knowledge, wisdom, and conviction enabled students whose development was charted at South Park to become good, conscientious citizens, and application of these qualities developed their ability “to discern discreetly and to judge soundly” and steered them “in right relation both to conduct and to life” (Bapst, 1933, p. 4). Since the greatest attribute of any nation, state, or city lay in its citizenry, Bapst was of the opinion that each person needed to take an active role in enriching the community.

In his 18 years as principal, Bapst attempted to strengthen the bonds between school, home, and community. One of his most popular projects, “Boost Buffalo Week,” became an annual event. School corridors, transformed into a boardwalk setting, displayed what modern living in the 20th century could be and centered on the unique contributions to contemporary progress made by regional artisans and inventors. Students and faculty constructed exhibits, assembled projects, conducted tours, and organized demonstrations, with prizes awarded for outstanding achievements. Families were encouraged to attend; civic leaders were invited to participate. Sessions were held during and after school hours so that as many people as possible might have the opportunity to participate. As a result, “town and gown” came to understand each other better and pride in community undertakings was strengthened (Buffalo Board of Education, 1920, p. 39).

Community-building in the school also became a hallmark of the Bapst administration at South Park High School. In consideration for growth in the school, Bapst initiated various lecture series and assemblies such as Lenten talks, Christmas pageants, and Mothers’ Day programs which involved students, faculty, and parents. He personally planned, wrote, and supervised each talk and event, the most elaborate and lengthy of which were the Senior Assemblies—weekly, one-hour talks during spring semester for members of the graduating class. Bapst himself conducted these programs whose themes centered around the adult world: college life, marriage, family and work obligations, and responsible citizenship. On occasion, with titles such as “Good Versus Evil” (1929a) and “Judge Not and Ye Shall Not Be Judged” (1929b), the topics seemed more appropriate for church pulpit than academic podium. Nevertheless, he used these gatherings to establish and maintain a positive community spirit and viewed them as a vital part of his leadership responsibilities.

Bapst took seemingly ordinary tasks and used them to his advantage. For example, he made the beautification of the school grounds a community-wide effort, assigning various tasks to students, teachers, and parents so that everyone would have a sense of belonging and feel pride in the environment. He initiated the custom of a springtime Senior Day Parade in which much of South Buffalo became involved. Shops advertised the event and merchants donated prizes. Floats depicted patriotic ideas, recognized student activities, and advertised local businesses. The day of the parade was a school holiday

and normal commercial activity was suspended. The parade was an important expression of community life that connected school and neighborhood, visually affirming the dependency of each upon the other.

Since Bapst believed that the health and well-being of the school community was related to the ways he as chief administrator could assist others when they could not help themselves, he worked hard to instill in others a sense of justice and equality. He was so opposed to what he saw as special privilege that he withdrew South Park High School from athletic competition with other high schools. His reasoning was that interscholastic sports focused too prominently upon a small number of students whereas intramural sporting events involving a larger number of students fostered community spirit and promoted individual achievement.

Bapst believed it important that each student be challenged academically and that rivalries about grades be set aside to cultivate harmony within the school. To this end, he personally planned each student's schedule. Even in the days when enrollment at South Park neared 2,000, he did not abandon this practice, taking an interest in knowing his students as individuals.

If community life was to flourish, everyone, faculty members included, had to set a good example. One memorandum from the Office of the Principal chided teachers who did not use their free periods for academic purposes related to teaching. Bapst took to task those who read newspapers, socialized, or shaved during school time, even though they may have completed their official classroom duties. He reasoned that teachers were paid to work the length of the day while on school premises; therefore, it was a matter of justice to the employer that teachers spend the entire school day in a way directly connected to their teaching responsibilities. And that set an example for the students. But, for Bapst, the motive was not contractual or legal, but moral, that is, "a full day's work for a full day's pay" (Bapst, memorandum, 1915).

Individual growth within the community found a natural expression in service to others. Each student was meant to develop personal talents and skills carefully. Ultimate fulfillment, however, could be found only in service within the community of family, neighborhood, city, and country. Giving back something of what one had received was the final step in Bapst's educational program.

Bapst asked his students to look beyond the obvious to deeper realities. In an address to the members of the Senior Class of 1928, he discussed the fundamental importance of service to himself:

My profession would be cheap if all I were merely to say to you is that you have learned fifty-two pages of Algebra the first term, and sixty-four the next; or if I were concerned only with your Biology, Caesar or Geometry.

Where would the idea of service be? Where would I stand on my own recommendation in asking you to throw yourself in the cause to which you are pledged? (p. 9)

For each student at South Park High School, then, it was crucial that a spirit of service become a part of and enhance one's undertakings. Without such a spirit, selfishness would gain an upper hand and stifle human development.

Service, then, was the capstone of life. For Bapst, no South Park student would graduate thinking that society would not demand something in return for what had been given. Indeed, this was the calling of everyone, Bapst and each graduate included. "True greatness lies in our individual selves.... It is the spirit of service that enhances individual worth" (Bapst, 1927, p. 8). To render service was as natural as life itself. Happiness and fulfillment depended upon serving others.

We hear a great deal, boys and girls, about service. Sometimes we misinterpret that term; sometimes the term is misused for the purpose of propaganda. The service I would ask you to consider is service in the right meaning of the term...that you give yourself wholly to whatever cause you are going to pledge yourselves throughout life. (Bapst, 1928, p. 2)

Personal care for the individual, community enhancement, and service form the nucleus of the plan Bapst implemented at South Park High School. But it was at Canisius High School and College that he first experienced the importance of these qualities. It was from the Jesuit tradition that Bapst absorbed this altruistic worldview. Working for others was the bedrock of his ministry as educator and administrator.

Professionally, what Bapst gained from his years with the Jesuits at Canisius College on Washington Street included an ability to communicate clearly, a passion for regularity and orderliness, a respect for authority, and a commitment to quality schooling. All these attributes were very much in evidence as he faced the challenges of a new role in a new school.

It was, perhaps, the fact that South Park High School was a *tabula rasa* upon which Bapst's enormous wealth of creativity could be unfurled. He seemed determined to impart to the new school a distinctive character, one which took body, mind, and soul into consideration so that students would benefit from academic, social, physical, and spiritual training. If the primary function of education was to graduate people "who can think for themselves," it would also need to form thinkers capable of weighing and judging the realities of the modern world with heart, mind, and conscience (Bapst, 1929c, p. 2).

CONCLUSION

From meager beginnings, a remarkable institution emerged during the nearly two decades Bapst served as principal of South Park High School, a place where students and faculty learned together, both in and out of the classroom. Over the years, South Park earned a reputation for academic excellence and lively traditions, playing a vital role in the life of the South Buffalo community which it served. Much of this success is attributed to the efforts of Dr. Robert Bapst, whose tireless energy, spirit, and conviction transformed the fledgling school into a respected institution which promoted true wisdom by developing the whole person.

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